

ROPE BURN

By Bruce W. Most

Big Sleep Press

“Delivers everything you expect from a first-rate mystery . . . Nick DeNunzio is one of the savviest sleuths to come down the mystery trail in a while.”

~ Margaret Coel, *New York Times* bestseller

“It'll grab you like a roll of barbed wire.” ~ A reader

Prologue

“It’s time you paid up for your sins, Jack,” said the man.

Jack Hooker tipped his tan cowboy hat toward the big Wyoming sky and laughed. The pathetic excuse of a man standing a dozen feet away musta been watchin’ them money-suckin’, Bible-thumpin’ TV preachers. Now *them* is folks who need to pay up for their sins.

“You plannin’ on doin’ the collectin’?” Hooker taunted.

The rancher lazily scanned the sea of sagebrush and buffalo grass. The man had come alone in his pickup. As far as Hooker could see—and from where he stood, mendin’ barbed wire fence, he could see a damn sight in every direction—there weren’t another soul around. Just endless, treeless rangeland, low rolling hills, and scattered Herefords shimmering under ripples of heat. A place where a man breathed aloneness. That’s what he loved about this land—the pull of its solitude, endless space where the world lets you be. A place that tests a man, and where most men, like this mamma’s boy standing nervously in front of him, come up wantin’.

“You’re hurting a lot of folks, Jack. Good folks.”

Hooker sensed the fear in the man’s voice.

“You all think you got cause, don’t ya?” he said. “You maybe more’n most of ’em. Truth is, some folks just don’t deserve what they don’t have.”

“You were warned. It’s time somebody put a stop to you.”

Weeks before, half a dozen men had come to his house, under cover of darkness, threatenin’ him. Empty threats by empty men. He laughed at ’em and chased ’em off with a shotgun.

“A bunchya couldn’t scare me before. What makes you think you’re up to doin’ it by yourself?”

Hooker scanned the landscape again, this time more cautiously. Tough to imagine this man had the guts to come alone. More likely they sent him as a decoy, in broad daylight, when they thought he’d be least suspecting. They knew if they came again, like some kinda posse, he’d snatch his huntin’ rifle from his pickup and use ’em for target practice.

Hooker glanced at the man’s pickup twenty yards away. Extended cab. Room enough to hide two, three men. Or maybe they was lying in the truck bed under the tarp. Maybe their plan was for this decoy to get a jump on him so’s they could rush him before he could get to his rifle.

“How exactly this gonna happen?” Hooker baited, one eye warily on the pickup.

The man tried to put on a convincing show, clenching his gloved fists, face filled with blood, neck veins corded. But Hooker didn’t see no gun or knife or anything else on him that could serve as a weapon. His fists alone wouldn’t be enough. Jack Hooker might be seventy-seven years old, but he was a leather-tough seventy-seven.

“Well, come on then.” Hooker didn’t even bother to brace himself. Just stood there slumped shouldered, like the man threatening him wasn’t worth payin’ no mind.

The coward didn’t move. Figures, thought Hooker. He could see the fear, the hesitancy in the man’s eyes. He’d come full of fury, but no plan . . . no balls. Like the rest of ’em in this county. No balls to do what needs to be done.

That ain't never troubled *him*.

"Knew you wasn't man 'nough." Hooker turned back to his work. Enough of these threats, as hot and empty as a westerly wind. It was gettin' on in the afternoon and he still had fence to fix. A man don't survive out here less he works to the bone. And unlike most ranchers he actually *liked* fixin' fence. Liked replacing downed posts and rusty broke wire, stretching shiny new wire fiddle-string tight. Liked the rhythm of the work, the isolation, the satisfaction of fencing off what was his and letting others know where they wasn't welcome.

He was reaching for a roll of barbed wire when he sensed movement. Sensed it too late. Saw a heavy yellow metal bar swinging against the sulfurous Wyoming sky. The fence stretcher he'd used to string countless miles of fence.

Jack Hooker was tough enough for a man-to-man fight, he just weren't fast enough. Lifetime of ranching gets downright hard on the joints. Slows a man down.

He realized, just before the fence stretcher caught the side of his skull, the thick serrated teeth taking a chunk out of his cowboy hat and his flesh and maybe bone, that perhaps he'd underestimated this man. Perhaps he'd been just a tad too full of himself for his own good.



Hooker woke with a head that felt like the time a bull had danced on it at a rodeo in Kaycee.

He lay on his stomach, face down, each breath kicking up puffs of chalk-fine dust. He could taste blood in his mouth. Blood trickling down from his skull. Probably from where he felt the throbbing, intense pain.

What he knew for certain was he no longer was where he'd been fixin' fence. The light was lower and the landmarks different. Not the features directly in front of his face—rocks, buffalo grass, prickly pear cactus. Them coulda been anywhere in this part of Wyoming. No, what was different was the small sandstone cliffs in the distance, forming the edges of a valley. The cliffs, pink from the lowering sun, looked familiar. He was still on his land. He'd lived his entire life on this land, once his father's land, his grandfather's land before that. He'd rode every inch of it, breathed its pure air, slept under its stars, soaked in its quiet, suffered its winds. He'd shoved already deep family roots yet deeper into its parched soil.

Hard to imagine folks living without land under their feet they could call their own. Hard for 'em to understand its inescapable pull.

Antelope Valley—that's where he was. He always loved this valley. He'd run cattle off and on in it for years. Dependable water. Good grass when you let it fallow. He remembered horseback riding through it with the woman he ended up not marrying. His one regret in life.

What the hell was he doing in Antelope Valley?

He didn't know exactly where in the valley 'cause his brain was too woozy to reckon exactly where he'd been dumped. He guessed the old homesteader's hut might be close by. Fallin' in but still standin'.

Kinda like him.

He tried raising his woozy body to stand, but realized his hands were tied behind his back. Something scratchy laced his neck. *Rope*, it dawned on him, his gray cells running a tad slow at the moment.

A rare sense of fear clutched his throat. He raised his head and yelled, “Hey, what the fuck’s goin’ . . .” but his words died in his throat.

He dropped his head back down to the earth and tried to rein in the fear hammering his chest. He tried working the rope loose on his wrists, but it was tight. His fear began to curdle into anger. The sumbitch would pay for this. He listened for the man, but all he could hear was a stiff wind stirring the grass. His fear eased. He must be alone again. Like when he was fixin’ fence. The man . . . the cowards . . . whoever . . . musta left him for dead . . . for the turkey vultures. They had no spine for death. A mistake. They didn’t reckon how tough a man like him could be. A man didn’t come this far in this unforgiving land without being tough. That was the cowboy way, and he was tougher ’n most of ’em.

He heard a vehicle door slam. Moments later, a diesel engine rattled to life.

Fear returned with a vengeance. Jack Hooker turned his throbbing head but the pickup was out of his range of vision. Only more rock and grass, though now he could glimpse the trunk of a large cottonwood tree only feet away.

Frantically he struggled to untie his hands. “Hey, hey, what the hell you doin?” he yelled as the pickup shift into gear. Moments later the rope squeezed his windpipe shut.

Fear flashed to panic as the rope hoisted him to his feet. The rope creaked above him as it dragged across wood. As his body righted, he desperately fought to stand but he couldn’t quite get the footing right, like a small child struggling to learn to walk, the ganglia of nerves not shooting the right messages to the right places. Then he left the earth, his boots no longer able to touch his beloved soil, his lungs no longer able to breathe the pure air. He kicked, scissoring his legs in a frantic attempt to snap the rope’s crushing grip on his throat.

He screamed, but only he heard it, inside his skull.

His hat was gone and as he rose into the air, he could once again see the big Wyoming sky, deepening blue toward sunset. His body twisted in the wind, and he realized, with a final act of fear and defiance and not a sliver of remorse, that he finally *was* paying for his sins.

Chapter 1

The SUV's high beams exploded in the interior of Nick DeNunzio's Chevy Camaro as if someone had tossed in a phosphorous grenade.

Nick squeezed his eyes shut, slumped out of sight in the reclined driver's seat where he'd slept for the last hour at a rest area located along a desolate stretch of eastern Wyoming highway. He'd left Denver late that evening and he was tired and really didn't want to deal with this. If he remained out of sight, maybe the SUV and the headlights would go away.

But he knew better. The headlights belonged to a law enforcement vehicle. Local sheriff's department or highway patrol. Nick had awakened a few minutes earlier when the vehicle wheeled into the rest area. Peering over the dashboard, he watched a man in uniform and a dark cowboy hat dash into the restroom on an urgent mission. The officer emerged a short time later, considerably more relaxed. As he walked toward his vehicle, he spotted Nick's silver ZL1 backed into unlit corner of the parking lot under the shroud of a moonless night. The officer immediately dropped his hand to his sidearm. He stared several seconds, then double-timed to his patrol vehicle and pulled up to face Nick's vehicle. The man wasn't going to let him sleep.

The officer wanted Nick for something.

When the SUV's headlights failed to bring reaction from inside the Camaro, the officer flipped on the light bar, the reds and blues dancing off Nick's windshield. The officer cycled through his siren once, waited.

Nick waited, too, hoping against hope the officer would go away. But the SUV stayed, high beams on.

Nick knew the routine. The officer would have dispatch run the car's plates, or maybe he even had his own computer terminal, though Nick doubted that in this backwater land. The plates would come back as issued to a 2012 Chevrolet Camaro, registered to a Nick DeNunzio, Baltimore, Maryland. No lien holder. No reports it was stolen. The officer would then run Nick's name and vehicle through NCIC. This would take a few more minutes. Nick remained out of sight. NCIC, too, would come back clean. No warrants or criminal record for a Nick DeNunzio. Maybe then the officer would move on. Nick really was too tired for this shit. These days, he hated dealing with cops.

A cold May wind rocked his car and Nick shivered in his down jacket.

The patrol vehicle's door opened. Nick knew then that despite the clean bill of health, the officer wasn't satisfied. That was when he sat up, both hands open and visible above the steering wheel. No point in risking someone getting shot. He'd been through enough of that.

Nick squinted into the glare of the headlights. He couldn't see the officer well but he heard him scurry back into his vehicle. His voice boomed over a loudspeaker.

"This is the sheriff's department! Outta the car. Hands in the air!"

Nick complied slowly and stood by the driver's door.

Again the voice boomed over the speaker, no doubt scaring wildlife for miles around.

"Move to the front of the vehicle and bend face down on the hood!"

Nick bent over and pressed his face to the metal, cold from the chilly wind. He spread his arms and legs without being asked. He knew the drill.

The SUV door opened. Footsteps drew closer. "Hands behind your back."

"Isn't this going a bit far, deputy?" Nick said. "I'm just sleeping in my car." He figured it was a deputy and not the sheriff himself pulling graveyard.

"Put 'em behind your back—*now!*"

Nick complied and felt cuffs snap shut.

"Anyone else in the car with you?" the deputy demanded. "Any dogs?"

"No."

"I'm gonna frisk you—though I bet you already knew that." The deputy patted him down. "Stay!"

The deputy moved toward the passenger side of the car. In his left hand he held a large flashlight, in his right a nine millimeter handgun. Probably a Smith & Wesson, but Nick couldn't be sure. The deputy swept the light through the interior of the car. He would find no other occupants. Beyond the empty driver's seat, the rest of the car was crammed with clothes, boxes, fast-food wrappers, crackers and apples, empty Styrofoam coffee cups and pop cans, and the sediment of life's possessions, of someone who had abruptly pulled up stakes and stuffed what he could into the car, leaving no room for anyone else.

The officer holstered his gun and flashlight, returned to Nick, yanked him off the hood, and spun him around.

Nick squinted and turned his face away. "Think you could kill the lights?"

"I like 'em just fine the way they are. Why didn't you show yourself when I flashed my lights and siren?"

"I was hoping you'd go away. I'm tired. I need the sleep. Now I'll be wide-awake."

"Good. Got a feelin' you're gonna need to be awake."

"What's the problem, officer?"

"We'll get to that in a minute."

The deputy retrieved Nick's license and registration from the glove compartment. He checked the registration first. It would match the plates. He compared the picture and stats on the driver's license with the man standing in front of him, his eyes flicking back and forth. The stats and Nick wouldn't quite match.

The license said six-one, 195 pounds, but Nick knew he had gained weight in recent months, even before he hit the road. Too much stress, too little exercise, too much diner food. The date of birth would indicate age forty-four, though Nick recently noticed unsettling hints of gray creeping along the edges of his black hair. Life was aging him faster than his years. The wide-set gray-blue

eyes, the straight nose, and the solid chin in the photo would still be a close match, though four-day stubble muffled the chin a bit.

While the deputy checked his license, Nick squinted at the brass nametag on the man's brown shirt, opposite the badge. Danny Simmons.

"Nick DeNunzio," the deputy read slowly off the license. He peered from under the brim of his hat. "What kinda name is that? *DeNunzio*. Sounds like a mob name. You a mob guy?"

Nick didn't respond. That seemed to make the deputy nervous.

"Whaddya you doing out here?" asked Simmons. "This ain't a campground. You can't sleep here."

"Like I said, I was tired. And my car was overheating. It needed to cool off."

The deputy pressed his hand on the hood. "How long you been here?"

"An hour maybe."

"Where you come from?"

"Denver."

"Where you headed?"

"Nowhere in particular. Just traveling."

Somewhere. Anywhere but where he came from.

"A long way from home just to be traveling for no reason."

"Baltimore's not home anymore."

Nowhere was home. Most mornings he didn't know where he would be by nightfall. When he left Baltimore, he drove straight through to his sister's home in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. But he didn't stay long. Not that he didn't love Karen or they didn't get along well. They'd grown close after their mother died, her cancer-ridden body still wracked by the pain of their father's abandonment when they were kids. But his sister had her own family, with a great husband and three great kids. They didn't need his moody presence, and he didn't need a painful reminder of his own failed marriage and lack of offspring.

So he headed west after a few days, packing like manna several loaves of Karen's fresh, heavy bread, which saw him across Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle and well into New Mexico before it was gone. When he reached California and the sea, he turned north and began zigzagging across the West. He visited tourist sites like Yosemite and Zion, but most of the time he stayed off the interstates and away from big cities and tourist destinations, preferring roads and places more remote. He consulted maps only to ensure he didn't end up in the same place twice. More than once he found himself in some desolate location at dusk, where he would snack on apples and crackers and soda, and hunker down in his Camaro and sleep until the sun or animals woke him.

"What kinda work did you do in Baltimore?" asked the deputy.

"This and that." Nick struggled to keep emotion out of his voice.

"What kind of this and that? Mob work?"

"Look, beyond the fact you don't want me parking here, and I didn't steal toilet paper from the restroom, are these questions leading somewhere?"

"Were you in Chugwater tonight?"

"Chug *what*?"

“Chugwater. A blip in the road ’bout thirty miles west of here. Right on the interstate north of Cheyenne. Were you there tonight?”

“No. I turned onto Eighty-Five out of Cheyenne. Is there something exciting to see in Chugwater?”

“If I was to search this car, would I find a gun?”

“A Glock twenty-two. In a box. Why do you want to know?”

The deputy squinted warily into the car. He turned back to Nick. “Somebody stuck up a convenience store in Chugwater tonight. Pistol-whipped the clerk and took off with cash and probably a fistful of beef jerky. Not long after that a rancher near here reported gunshots. You got anything to do with either of them? Will I find your weapon recently discharged?”

Well, that sure as hell explained the deputy’s interest in him. “You mean did I rob a convenience store and shoot a cow?”

“Your attitude’s pissin’ me off, DeNunzio. Makes me think you got somethin’ to hide.”

“I was never near this Chugwater. I been trying to sleep for the last hour. Between the wind and the interruptions, it’s making me grouchy.”

“The stickup occurred less than two hours ago. ’Bout ’nough time for you to get here and sleep a little.”

“Is that what you think I would do if I just robbed a convenience store? Pull over and catch a few winks thirty miles from the scene of the crime?”

“There’s that attitude again, DeNunzio. That an East Coast attitude? I’ve heard about that.”

“I didn’t rob a convenience store.”

“The BOLO described a Caucasian male matching your height, driving a city car—a slick silver sedan with outta-state plates.”

“Well that sure as hell narrows it down.”

“Out here it does.”

“Look, it’s getting damn cold in this wind.”

Deputy Simmons hooked Nick’s right arm and steered him toward his patrol vehicle. “I’ll take ya someplace nice and warm.”



“You mighta mentioned to my deputy you’re an ex-cop,” chided Coldwater County Sheriff Buck Jackson as he escorted Nick out of the county jail into the late afternoon sun. “Instead of waiting for us to find out.”

“It didn’t seem relevant at the time.”

“Mighta saved you a stay in our accommodations.”

“I doubt it. Your deputy seemed bent on arresting *someone* for that robbery.”

Taking potshots at another lawman’s department wasn’t exactly etiquette, but Nick wasn’t feeling the brotherhood of law enforcement these days. It didn’t help that due to poor inter-agency communication it took the sheriff’s department half the day to learn that the Wyoming state patrol had arrested the real Chugwater robber an hour after the first stickup when the idiot, high on drugs

in a gray Pontiac Firebird with Colorado plates, tried to knock over another convenience store up the interstate in Douglas.

The sheriff leaned back against one of the department's SUVs and crossed his arms. A spindly shadow fell across the vehicle from a radio tower perched atop the single-story sheriff's office, which sat adjacent to the county courthouse in the town of Sweetgrass.

"Danny can be a little . . . impetuous," the sheriff conceded. "He really wants to be a big city detective."

"We don't need detectives like him."

"Don't worry, he'll never leave here. He's like most of us, he can't get drag himself away. This land has a kinda gravitational pull that keeps us earthbound, a sorta spiritual vortex."

"What are you, an astrophysicist in your spare time?"

Jackson smiled dryly. "Since Danny can't leave, he wants my job. Catching a stickup man single-handedly woulda helped his ambitions."

The sheriff didn't sound too worried about the potential competition.

"I don't give a shit about your departmental politics. The arrest was *bullshit*!"

The sheriff's smile dried up. "There *are* ex-cops who rob convenience stores. You were parked suspiciously in a remote rest area in the middle of the night in a car that reasonably matched the description of the suspect's car. And you *were* uncooperative. Especially the uncooperative part. 'Course, I can understand why you didn't want to bring up being an ex-cop."

Old angers and old fears surged inside Nick, feelings he'd tried desperately to bury these many months since leaving the force. Once they booked him it hadn't taken long, even in this backwater county, for his fingerprints and background check to reveal he was an ex-Baltimore detective. He could have lived with that. What he hadn't expected was Deputy Simmons calling the Baltimore PD to check up on him. After the call, the deputy gleefully rattled off in the interrogation room Nick's transgressions, calling him a "disgrace to cops everywhere."

If Simmons couldn't be a big city detective, he was going to do his damndest to bring one of them down.

"What exactly did your deputy tell you about me?" Nick asked.

Jackson pushed off the vehicle and stepped close to Nick. "You left behind a string of enemies in Baltimore. Killed a cop in a gunfight. Got several officers—"

"A dirty cop."

The sheriff nodded. "Was instrumental in the arrest and conviction of several officers on charges of corruption. Nailed some gangbangers along with them. Sounded like you brought down half the Baltimore police force."

"Don't believe everything people or the media say about me."

"It doesn't matter whether I do or don't. You're free to go."

Not exactly free, thought Nick. There was much more to his past than what the deputy had learned, much more than he would tell the sheriff of this hick county. More than what even those in Baltimore knew.

"Who did your deputy talk to back there?" asked Nick.

Jackson shook his head. "Someone who knew you. Don't know his name."

“Who” exactly would make a difference. Rumors spread like wildfire through the department. It would be dangerous if certain people discovered where he was.

“One other thing,” said the sheriff. “My deputy said you received death threats in Baltimore.”

Nick said nothing.

Jackson sized up Nick through silver-framed tinted glasses. He looked in his mid-fifties, with tufts of silver hair peeking below his white cowboy hat. His brown uniform was neatly pressed, showing off a surprisingly trim, athletic-looking body. His polished belt buckle, designed like the starred sheriff's badge pinned on his shirt, didn't disappear below a beer belly as Nick typically pictured rural sheriffs.

Jackson finally went on. “I mention the threats only because I wanna make sure trouble isn't following you into my county. I don't like trouble in my county.”

“There's no trouble following me, sheriff.”

Truth was, the death threats were the least of Nick's worries. It was the rest of his past he didn't want following.

“Good,” the sheriff said. “I assume you'll be on your way out of the county soon.”

A coal train whistled in the distance.

“As soon as I get a mechanic to check out my car. It's overheating.” Nick scanned the parking lot.

“Your vehicle's still down in Desolation.”

“Where?”

“A little town near where you were arrested. We towed it to the local garage til we could get a warrant and a crime scene investigator to go over it. Never got around that. The mechanic's young but he's good.”

“How do I get there?”

“One of my deputies will drive you down.”

“I appreciate that.”

“It's gonna be Monday before the garage opens, however, so I suggest you spend the next coupla nights at the Silver Spur motel there. It's a clean place and they're nice folks. I'll have 'em bill it to the county. Professional courtesy for the inconvenience we put you through.”

“Thanks, but I can take care of myself.”

Jackson shrugged. “Suit yourself. But you look like you could use a good night's sleep somewhere besides your car or our jail.” He paused, as if waiting for Nick to volunteer why he appeared down on his luck, but Nick volunteered nothing. “Also looks like you could use a square meal. Try the Rusty Nail. Not that you got a choice. Nothing else around. But it's decent food and the beer's cheap. Bill it to the county, too.”

While Nick didn't like taking the sheriff's largess, even as apology, the offer of free room and board was tempting. Money was tight and he had been sleeping in his car a lot lately. A potential car repair bill wouldn't help matters. The divorce and the interminable departmental investigation and now his travels had sapped a chunk of his savings, and a cop's savings—especially an honest cop—is never big to begin with.

“All right, I’ll take you up on your offer, sheriff. But it’s getting kinda late. Think they’ll have a vacancy?”

Jackson laughed. “They’ll be grateful for your business. They haven’t hung out a No Vacancy sign since Custer came through.”

“I think you also have my weapon,” Nick reminded him.

“Oh, yeah.” The sheriff pulled Nick’s semi-automatic out of a pants pocket and bullets out of the other, and handed them to him. A deputy appeared and Nick followed him to a patrol vehicle.

“Hey, DeNunzio,” the sheriff called after him. Nick stopped. “That was a brave thing you did, bringing down those dirty cops.”

Yeah, a brave thing. A brave thing that came at a terrible price.



Want to read the rest of Nick’s story? It’s available in the Kindle Store and free on KindleUnlimited. Click [here to order](#).